

The Pueblo Inquiry: All Sides Are Losers

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By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

News Analysis

A skipper, his ship, his service and his country all go on public "trial" today in a building at the sprawling San Diego Naval Amphibious Base.

The skipper is Cmdr. Lloyd Marvin Bucher, the orphan who went from Boys Town to the Navy as an enlisted man; rose to officer rank, and then one year ago this month surrendered his ship to the North Koreans.

The ship is the USS Pueblo, a slow, bulgy cargo vessel converted into a seagoing spy—with devices to listen in on conversations for miles around and then relay what it heard to shore commands.

The service is the United States Navy, trying hard not to blush for letting one of its ships be captured without firing a shot—a humiliation not suffered since 1812 when the USS Chesapeake was given up without a fight.

And the country is the United States—a democracy discomfited. It got caught playing the international spy game, then had to "confess" in front of the whole world to save its agents—a confession it simultaneously repudiated.

No matter what happens during the Pueblo court of inquiry, none of the participants can emerge whole.

Bucher will be stained in the eyes of a service not known for forgive and forget. This will be true down deep, even if he is hailed publicly as a hero.

The Pueblo will go down as a ship not equipped for its job. The Navy admits it did not have the destruct devices it needed to blow up the secret coding machines

below deck or to scuttle the whole ship.

The Navy, no matter how lengthy the explanations, will go down as allowing a tactical situation to get out of hand, to escalate into an international incident.

And the United States
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will have to bear the overall responsibility for the ship's capture, as it already has. More specifically, President Johnson as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The Nixon Administration will now have to look on the whole practice of ship spying in a new light.

Despite all those consequences, the Navy apparently realizes that the Pueblo incident cannot be left unexplained. So the service is promising a detailed inquiry of what happened to the Pueblo and why.

Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen Jr., Commander of the anti-submarine warfare services of the Pacific fleet, is president of the court of inquiry, comprised of himself and four other admirals. The court is simply a fact-finding body. It can build a case for a court-martial but cannot bring such proceedings itself.

Bucher and his surviving 81 shipmates are on hand to testify.

The first phase will concentrate on the ship's mission and the skipper's orders.

The second phase is expected to go into the capture of the Pueblo on Jan. 22 by four North Korean patrol boats in the Sea of Japan. The Pentagon said on Jan. 23 that the Pueblo was boarded "by an armed party in international waters" at a "reported position approximately 25 miles from the mainland of North Korea."

The Navy has said since

then that the Pueblo had four 50 calibre machine guns, two in the bow and two in the stern, that apparently were never used. However, some crewmen were wounded resisting in other ways or while destroying equipment.

Another question is why the skipper did not go full speed ahead out to sea, dragging the harrassing boat with him. Still another is why Bucher did not call for help sooner. The Pentagon said his first call for assistance came at the time the Pueblo "was actually boarded."

If Bucher had asked for help earlier, what could the Pentagon have done about it? Still secret testimony given last year to Congress disclosed that the U.S. had only four F-4 fighter-bombers in South Korea when the Pueblo was taken. And even those planes were rigged with nuclear weapons and would have had to be rearmed to help Bucher.

The Vietnam War apparently had left the U.S. short of planes elsewhere, particularly in South Korea. A question which lawmakers have raised already is why the Navy did not keep a fighting ship within helping range of the Pueblo.

The 41-year-old Bucher was commissioned as a submarine officer. This raises the question whether the Navy should have sent a man with that training to command a spy ship on her first mission. And what about the training of the crew? It has been alleged

the men did not know how to handle the deck guns.

The third phase of the inquiry concerns the crew's time in captivity. But the Navy has charted a course around one element—the crew's confessions.

The Navy's Judge Advocate General has ruled the Pueblo crew members were "illegal detainees" rather than prisoners of war.

This apparently means there is no intention to court-martial any of the men for their confessions. The 1955 Code of Conduct for Military Personnel states in paragraph 5: "When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am bound to give only name, rank, service number and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause."

Captain William R. Newsome, a lawyer and Navy veteran who serves as counsel of the Pueblo's court of inquiry, explained the Judge

Advocate's ruling this way:

"We have had an opinion that the crew members of the Pueblo were not prisoners of war; they were illegally detained. We are not in a state of hostility at the present time with the North Koreans; consequently, they are not the enemy." Thus, he said, the Code of Conduct would not apply to the Pueblo crew.

While the ruling appears to circumvent the intent of the Code of Conduct issued as an Executive Order by President Eisenhower in 1955 in the wake of alleged "brain-washings" of Americans by North Koreans during the Korean War, there are Navy regulations which still appear to apply to the Pueblo crew.

Navy Regulation 0730 is one. It states: "The commanding officer shall not permit his command to be searched by any person representing a foreign state nor permit any of the personnel under his command to be removed from the command by such persons so long as he has the power to resist."